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35 years, one neighborhood: A Philly artist documents the life of the city, and her dreams for it

By Samantha Melamed
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MICHAEL BRYANT, Sarah McEneaney with her dog, Mango, stands at the junction of the viaduct and the end of the proposed Phase One of the Rail Park.

L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Thirty-five years ago, Sarah McEneaney moved to Philadelphia's Callowhill neighborhood and almost immediately began painting it: the industrial buildings that seemed to keep burning down around her, the rail trestle cutting across the grid, the vacant lots and used-car dealers and urban decay.

She painted her home, her garden, her pets. She painted the rottweilers that barked at her from behind a chain-link fence. When someone set fire to her studio building, she painted that. When she was sexually assaulted in her home, she created paintings about that, too.

"I kept doing that, and, as it turns out, 30-plus years later I've ended up telling the story of my life," McEneaney, 61, said. "But I like to think it's a life other people can relate to and bring their own stories to."

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Trestletown from the Wolf, 2016, acrylic on wood, diptych, 35 3/4 x 95 5/8 inches



She also ended up telling the story of the neighborhood - a neighborhood she helped shape. McEneaney led the creation of the Callowhill Neighborhood Association in 2000 and serves as its president. She is also president of Friends of the Rail Park, a group working to establish an elevated park running along the old Reading Viaduct.

All told, it's been 35 years of art- and change-making in Callowhill.

Now, both are on display in *When You Wish*, a show of paintings that depict McEneaney's life, her neighborhood, and her vision for its future, on view at Locks Gallery (600 S. Washington Sq.) through Oct. 9.

"She went in early on and changed the neighborhood, basically. . . . It's almost like she's making this into her utopia," gallery director Sueyun Locks said. "Her neighborhood becomes her muse."

McEneaney bought an old warehouse there in 1979, the same year she graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

"It was very industrial. It was busy during the day, and at night it was totally desolate and kind of scary," she said.

When the building was ravaged by arson, she decided to rebuild and move in anyway. Her parents had died before she finished college, and she was looking for roots.

"I went away to college and I never went home again," she said. "I was making a home for myself, and I thought this was a place to do it."

But she didn't become a neighborhood activist - or even realize she had neighbors - until 2000, when a Phillies stadium was proposed for the Callowhill neighborhood.

“That’s what started it,” she said. “Those of us who were living up here, north of Vine Street, said we do have a neighborhood here, but we don’t have a neighborhood association.”

She helped launch the civic group. And when she heard of the idea for a viaduct park a few years later, she began advocating for that, too.

The idea of an elevated park was irresistible to McEneaney, who used to walk the tracks all the way from Noble Street to the Reading Terminal train shed.

“I used to ride these trains. Then, I walked [the tracks] for years. I’ve been scared walking under it at night. I’ve had such a connection to it.”



Studio, 2015, acrylic on wood, 36 x 48 inches

L O C K S G A L L E R Y



That’s evident in the show at Locks, a study of her life in the neighborhood - zoomed in to focus on one of her cats, or zoomed out to encompass a panoramic cityscape.

Some paintings depict her studio: paint-spattered floors, scuffed white walls hung with works in progress, tiny paintings within paintings. Others show her garden, cool and lush inside brick walls, but set in the shadow of the tangled fence and switches of the Peco Energy substation just beyond.

Dominating the show, two large canvases depict the neighborhood from above, the viaduct a lush green artery coursing through it. She’s been painting the viaduct since 2003. Friends (and she has many, after living here for decades) let her go on their roofs to sketch.

The source material, she said, “is a combination of observation, photography, imagination, and what I know from being here for so long.”

She describes the works as creative nonfiction: They’re the viaduct as it is (still wild, awaiting long-delayed state funding), and as she’d like it to be.



When You Wish, 2015, acrylic on linen, 48 1/2 x 72 1/2 in.

In one painting, *When You Wish*, the viaduct is hung with swings and host to a pop-up beer garden, which McEneaney had championed for the site. There are faded signs of long-gone businesses, timber skeletons of new construction, and, above it all, a line of skywriting remembered from a 2014 project by artist Dave Kyu, who hired airplanes to write messages composed by community groups. Theirs: “When you wish upon a park.” (McEneaney held a cookout for the occasion.)

Another piece, *Trestletown from the Wolf*, shows the neighborhood from a different vantage, a different point in time.

Inspecting the work, McEneaney noted that here, the construction underway in *When You Wish* was already complete.

“Do my paintings show the change? I guess they do,” she said. “I don’t see the area as fast-changing. Maybe it seems fast now, but I was here for so long when nothing seemed to happen.”

Locks art dealer Doug Schaller compared McEneaney to artists like John Sloan, who painted New York’s elevated trains, and Edward Hopper - painters whose work captured the soul of a city at a certain moment in time.

“It’s very interesting when an artist who is working very quietly is also one of the most important voices behind a project that will transform Philadelphia.”

Could it be a case of life imitating art?

He thinks so. “She was fixated on her neighborhood, and she took initiative.”